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TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 7949  
INFO RUEHZS/ASSOCIATION OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN NATIONS PRIORITY  
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 1507  
RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING 4712  
RUEHPB/AMEMBASSY PORT MORESBY 3661  
RUEHBY/AMEMBASSY CANBERRA 1986  
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI 1575  
RUEHHK/AMCONSUL HONG KONG 2426  
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC  
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RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 JAKARTA 000270

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SUBJECT: INDONESIA CELEBRATES THE YEAR OF THE RAT

REF: A. 07 JAKARTA 03370

[1](#)B. 07 JAKARTA 00343

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Classified By: Pol/C Joseph Legend Novak, reasons 1.4 (b+d).

[1](#)1. (U) This message was coordinated with Consulates Medan and Surabaya.

[1](#)2. (C) SUMMARY: On February 7--with a splash of red and whiff of incense--Indonesians celebrated a lively Lunar New Year across the archipelago. Such celebrations--and indeed most displays of Chinese culture--were illegal during the Suharto era. Celebrations have been increasingly open since the end of Suharto's regime, however, and Chinese New Year is now a national holiday. That said, in discussions with poloffs, prominent human rights lawyers, activists, and other Indonesians continue to underscore concerns about anti-Chinese discrimination. END SUMMARY.

CELEBRATING THE YEAR OF THE RAT

[1](#)3. (SBU) Things have come a long way since ethnic Chinese cultural celebrations were illegal during the Suharto era. On February 7, Indonesians legally celebrated the Lunar New Year for the eighth time since it was banned under the Suharto regime over 30 years ago. In urban centers across Java, Sumatra and Sulawesi, major shopping malls and hotels sponsored events featuring lion dances, acrobats, and other traditional Chinese entertainment. Lunar New Year--called "Imlek" in Indonesia--celebrations in Surabaya were the largest in recent memory. One celebration at a major Surabaya mall was billed as the largest Imlek celebration in Indonesia's history. Chinese Indonesians were free to go to their temples and cemeteries, which many did. Some malls and hotels in Jakarta featured mock statues of large furry rats.

[1](#)4. (SBU) In Sumatra, Imlek celebrations have become simply another part of the cultural milieu--although ceremonies were held quietly at Chinese temples in Sumatra as recently as seven or eight years ago. (Note: Due in part to its close proximity to historic trade routes and to peninsular Southeast Asia, Sumatra is home to some of Indonesia's

largest concentrations of ethnic Chinese. Unlike the rest of the archipelago, many ethnic-Chinese Sumatrans speak Chinese dialects as their first and sometimes second language.) Increasingly, the celebrations have become so common in Sumatra that they attract no more notice than other cultural events and, unlike Christmas, require little in the way of extra security.

#### A NOTE OF CAUTION

15. (C) Despite the obvious openness in celebrations, there is a dark note. People who remember anti-Chinese riots and the decades of discrimination are not convinced that Indonesia has really turned a corner in ethnic relations. Tensions have recently flared in certain areas, such as West Kalimantan (see ref A). The CEO of a major property development company recently told us that he still felt anti-Chinese resentment and "the current atmosphere feels fragile." If something sparked major unrest like that which Indonesia saw in the 1998 timeframe, the ethnic Chinese community would be the first to be blamed, he said, adding that he has kept his wealth parked overseas since 1998. Resentment is due to many ethnic Chinese generally being "richer" than other ethnic groups because they were barred from government jobs and therefore "had no choice but to pursue private business," he said. Other senior leaders made public statements reflecting a similar sentiment of caution. Kwik Kian Gie, a former minister in the Cabinets of Abdurrahman Wahid and Megawati Soekarnoputri, told the press that Indonesia's ethnic Chinese community should not celebrate "as if it is a demonstration of their wealth."

16. (C) Anti-discrimination activists Ester Jusuf, Wahyu Effendi, and prominent human rights lawyer Frans Winarta told poloff that despite improvements, ethnic Chinese Indonesians still face discrimination. An anti-ethnic discrimination draft law has been on the books for over a year (see ref B),

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but has stalled, they say, due to lack of political will and lack of coordination among advocacy groups who are working to push the bill through.

17. (C) According to Jusuf and Winarta, there is some evidence that ethnic Chinese still face stiffer standards in order to gain admission to the country's top public universities. And, despite a progressive citizenship law passed in 2006 which unequivocally bestowed Indonesian citizenship on ethnic Chinese and eliminated the need for citizenship certificates, government officials in some areas still asked ethnic Chinese persons to present citizenship certificates in order to formalize marriages, according to Jusuf. Poor communities of ethnic Chinese bear the brunt of underlying discrimination in the form of special fees exacted by corrupt government officials. According to Winarta, the problem of discrimination runs so deep that it will "take one or two generations" to overcome.

#### STILL MUCH IMPROVED

18. (C) Since 1998 and the fall of Suharto, Indonesia has come a long way on democratization, human rights and general tolerance toward those perceived as "different." The treatment of Chinese Indonesians is only one sterling example of the improved multicultural atmosphere and anyone present in the country on February 7--who was used to what transpired at Lunar New Year during the Suharto timeframe--would have been utterly astounded by the liveliness of the celebrations. For that reason, many Chinese Indonesians were not especially upset by the end of Suharto's rule and his recent death.

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